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# **Utopianism and social change: Materialism, Conflict and Pluralism**

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This article discusses criticisms that utopia and utopianism undermine social change. It outlines two types of utopia, future and current. It argues against claims that utopianism is idealist and steps aside from material and conflictual dimensions of society and so undermines change, proposing that utopias are material and conflictual and contribute to change. Against liberal and pluralist criticisms that utopianism is end-ist and totalitarian and terminates diversity and change it argues that utopianism can encompass liberal and pluralist dimensions and be dynamic rather than static. It is proposed that criticisms create false connotations and dichotomies. Critical perspectives, rather than being rejected, are answered on their own terms. Utopianism, it is argued, is part of change, materially, now and in the future.

Keywords: utopia, utopianism, change, materialism, conflict, pluralism

Utopianism aims for something better. To get somewhere better involves change so, amongst other things, utopianism is about social change. This article focuses specifically on limits to utopias' and utopianism's capacity to contribute to social change. It looks at two types of utopia, current and future, and their fortunes within left utopias. I will discuss two areas in which there are possible limits to utopianism's ability to contribute to social change. The first is in its possible avoidance or even undermining of engagement with material reality and of conflicts that lead to change. This is as a result of utopianism being idealist or stepping aside from society. The second area is where utopia is an end, and has been achieved, and so change is no longer possible or relevant and is ruled out. This raises issues of totalitarianism, liberalism and pluralism, as it seems to be implied that something different from the utopia is not possible or desirable.

I wish to argue two things. Firstly, materialist and conflict criticisms of utopianism can be answered by materialist and conflict perspective answers. Against a view of utopias as idealistic and avoiding reality, I argue that they provide a material and conflict basis for change. So from a materialist and conflict, and not idealist, perspective, utopias are about change rather than undermining it. Secondly, I wish to argue that utopias need not be final ends. They may be liberal and pluralist, involving criticism and diversity, which lead to change and make utopias processes and not ends.

In sum, rather than rejecting the materialist and conflict approach of criticisms and defending idealistic utopianism, this article is a materialist and conflict reply to materialist and conflict criticisms that are negative about the role of utopias in change. It is also a reply to liberal and pluralist perspectives on utopia, similarly not by rejecting liberal and pluralist dimensions but arguing that utopianism can encompass them. This article supports the role of utopianism, future and current, in change.

## Future and current utopias

Thomas More (1494) is credited with inventing the word 'utopia', the title of his sixteenth century novel. It refers to components from Greek that mean something that is good (eu) but not (ou) a place (topos). So it means a good place that is no place. It is a better society that does not exist, at least not yet. Utopia is what is wished for and the wish for it is utopianism. (For a recent perspective on More and utopia see Levitas 2016).

Utopianism is seen to occur when we think about a future happy life not as a private, individual aspiration, just for an individual life, but on a public, societal level. A utopia can be a prescription or blueprint for an ideal society in the future or a different place. It can also be in the past, in a time, real or imagined, we are nostalgic for that does not exist any more, and maybe did not if we have romanticised the past. Utopianism is also related to the present because concern about how things are makes us think about a better future. (See Bauman, 1976; Levitas, 2011).

Ernst Bloch (1986) in *The Principle of Hope* and other works saw utopianism in a variety of often everyday things: myths, literature, fairy tales, theatre, art, architecture, music, and religion, as well as social and revolutionary thought. These contain personal wishes but, in addition, an aspiration to fulfil hopes, also about social change. So utopianism is about anticipation of something better and it becoming possible and is in both visions of the future and practices of the present.

There are two ways in which utopias and utopianism are about social change (see Bauman 1976; Goodwin and Taylor 1982; Levitas 2011; Sargisson 2012). Firstly, utopianism is a basis for critical assessment of the present. An idea of an ideal society is something against which we can evaluate the present. We can see where the present does not match up to what we think society should be. This is a footing for critique and change. Goodwin and Taylor (2009) say that critical utopianism is a foundation for constructive utopianism. So, secondly, utopianism is an ideal for the future that involves a wish for the future. This helps drive change away from the present to something different. Something that supports criticism, idealism and a wish for a better world can help social change. While some emphasise the critical role of utopias (see Levitas 2011; Sargisson 2012; Moylan 1986), utopianism cannot be just about criticism or even change as this lacks something to distinguish it from other critical or political projects. Being about the goals or alternative, their design and not just an aspiration for something different, is what makes utopia distinct.

Utopianism involves making a plan for what a future society could look like. A danger of not having enough of a plan is that we overturn existing society without a good idea of what the alternative might be and how it would work (see Leopold 2016; Mill 1989). Too detailed or rigid a plan may not allow us to adapt to unforeseen circumstances or allow collective democratic determination of how society should be organised. But if we are to change to a better society it is important to have some idea of what that would be like and how it would operate in a way that would make it better than current society. Otherwise large-scale change is a big risk. Having a plan also stops people misusing a political idea in the future because the society we should have has not been set out, as it could be said happened in so-called communist societies. One way we can have a plan is by a model being tested in small-scale

experiments in its main features in current societies. These also show people that an alternative is possible and so can encourage change. They are an experiment but also a demonstration (as A.S. Neill said about Summerhill School: see Neill 1962: 4; Hemmings 1972: 71). So both future and current utopias are important for making sure that change to a better society works out well.

I wish to look at future utopias, ideas of an ideal society in the future. These are often speculative and on a macro scale. I also want to discuss current utopias, projects now that can be seen as utopian because they are very different to mainstream society and attempt a utopian alternative. Current utopias are often actual and micro. Current utopias include co-ops (see, for example, Cornforth 1995), sharing economies (Parsons 2014), intentional communities (Ben-Rafael et al 2013; Kanter 1972), alternative education (Gander 2016; Hern 2008; Neill 1962), urban social centres (Chatterton 2010; Hodgkinson and Chatterton 2006), alternative food cultures like freeganism (Clark 2004; Edwards and Mercer 2013), and ecological communities (Chatterton 2013; Ergas 2010). Current utopias can be in reclaimed land (like the private land claimed for common use by Marinaleda, a Communist village in Spain: see Hancox 2013), in built architecture (like new towns or estates), squats, occupations, gardens, including community gardens and landscaping (see Crossan et al 2016; Miles 2008). They are found in a localist turn in the anti-austerity and alter-globalisation movements (Chatterton 2010; della Porta 2015; Pleyers 2010). There has been a growth of interest in current utopianism so it is important to assess criticisms of utopia in this context.

These aim to make an ideal or better place not just through conventional future-oriented means of change such as parties and protest but also by creating countercultures and alternative societies in existing society. Current alternatives may be attempts to build utopias bit by bit here and now. They are attempts at a better society in practice and can be prefigurative. By practicing a society now they create basis for that society being implemented more widely in the future. In this sense they address the issue of transition to a better society, which future utopias can tend not to. Current alternatives include traditionally counterposed approaches of gradual change, revolution, and more anarchist initiatives alongside party politics and social movements. Current utopias have been tried in the past and I include historical attempts in this category.

Small alternatives within existing society can be a reaction against large-scale total utopias that everyone has to conform to (as Pleyers 2010 identifies in the alter-globalisation movement). They maintain utopian ideals by existing alongside wider society, avoiding the dystopian total way utopia has been envisaged otherwise. I will return to the issue of utopias existing in a pluralist way alongside other forms. By occurring within or aside from current society, present alternatives are in another place, even if that place exists. If utopianism is about a better world that does not exist then projects that try to create this and get micro-institutions of it in place are utopianism, experiments in utopia, or even utopias, in that they are putting into practice structures of an alternative ideal society (Goodwin and Taylor 2009 and Levitas 2013, amongst others, see within-society initiatives in present or past time as utopias).

The Mayor of Marinaleda, Sánchez Gordillo, says:

'We have learned that it is not enough to define utopia, nor is it enough to fight against the reactionary forces. One must build it here and now, brick by brick, patiently but steadily, until we can make the old dreams a reality: that there will be bread for all, freedom among citizens, and culture; and to be able to read with respect the word "peace". We sincerely believe that there is no future that is not built in the present' (Hancox 2013: 3).

For him, utopia should be a positive practice rather than merely oppositional, and to be built now rather than something just for the future. Pursuing utopia is partly about utopia now as a form of social change.

## **Left utopias**

There are many areas of utopianism; in literature, for example (see Jameson 2007; Kumar 1987), feminist utopias (in the fiction of authors like Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Marge Piercy and Ursula Le Guin, and in the social and political thinking of writers such as Fraser 1994 and Firestone 2015; see also Sargisson 1996) and anti-racist utopias (see Kelley 2002). There are capitalist, right-wing and libertarian utopias (advocated by Nozick 1974 and Stirner 2010 and discussed by Gray 2008, Featherstone 2017 and Mannheim 1979), even conservative utopias (see Goodwin and Taylor 2009). Utopias have come from the East and pre-modern societies as well as the West and modernity (see Sargent 2010; Longxi 2002). In the final section of this article I will discuss liberal and pluralist utopianism. In this section I shall focus on left-wing utopias, future and current, to give a more specific grounding to utopianism and issues of social change.

Left-wing utopias have waned in popularity since the decline of communism and social democracy, but not completely (see Devine 1988 and Albert 2003 for designs for alternative economies). Attempts at communism in practice were repressive. For some, this resulted partly from trying to create a different total society that had not been tested before (Mill 1989). Communism as a utopia became less attractive. It has become associated more with dystopia (although views differ on whether Marx's communism was a utopia: see Lovell 2004; Paden 2002; Smith 2009). It has also waned because of a problem of agency, the working class not proving a collective agent for socialism, leading to a quest for alternative means of transition beyond a class-party one (for recent discussions of left agency see della Porta 2015; Honneth 2017; and Masquelier 2017a).

Social democracy is about reforms within capitalism, so less about a future different society. The welfare state of social democracy has a different logic to capitalism, though, about collectivism and need, rather than private ownership and demand, so points to alternative social relations. Critics who saw the social democratic state as maintaining capitalism or as too statist and centralist now defend it for its alternative social principles within capitalism (see della Porta 2015: 76, 86, 96-7; Masquelier 2017a: 193). But social democracy has declined as the economy and public sector have been privatised and marketised in parts of the world.

Bauman (2003), who has written on socialism as utopia (Bauman 1976), argues that there has been a loss of confidence in societal transformation, that this is possible or will turn out well. People no longer believe in models of perfection that cover all of society and leave no space for difference or change. Utopias are no longer, as

communism was, about final ends in the future, settled, public, in state territories and with people happy to conform. Bauman says utopias are no longer set in places and do not envisage final ends. He sees utopianism as more individualised, in purely private imaginations, sporadic in society and current. This is a consequence of the experience of communism and the rise of postmodern and sceptical thought, as well as of globalisation which undermines the power of states to create alternative systems and which is so pervasive it is difficult to have separate societies aside from it. (See also Kumar 2010 on the end of utopia).

However Bauman's critique can lead to different conclusions. One that I will come to at the end of this article is that utopianism does not have to be rejected because of a failure to allow difference and change. We can think of utopias that are pluralist and that will change. The other is that a shift away from society-wide utopias need not lead only to utopias in private individual imaginations but can lead to utopias which are still social but more micro-level alternatives within wider society, which if they are to be more generalised, if not totally, are tested first.

With the loss of confidence in future total communist society and the erosion of social democracy within capitalism, some socialist utopias are now about other alternatives within current societies. They have communist or social democratic principles for collective ownership or for the public good over private gain. The alternatives share these ideologies' aims for collective control, need over profit and for egalitarian and non-market provision. They include, as mentioned above, alternative economies, social centres, food counter-culture based on avoiding waste and for provision according to need, and free education experiments, like free universities. There is a precedent for non-capitalist utopias within capitalism in 19<sup>th</sup> century utopian socialism (see Geoghegan 2008; Levitas 2011; Taylor 1982). In recent sociology, writers who have discussed non-capitalist utopias inside capitalism include Holloway (2010) and Wright (2010) (Dawson 2016 outlines alternative societies that have been discussed in social theory). They outline current utopias that involve change to different future social forms. There should not be a dichotomy between future utopia and current micro practices, the latter seen as an alternative to the former.

## **Materialism, conflict and change**

The utopias outlined are about change to more ideal alternatives. They involve both current and future utopias. But does utopia facilitate social change or is it a hindrance to change? There have been many criticisms of utopianism; for instance, from a Marxist perspective, of utopian socialism. (Marx and Engels were also positive about and influenced by utopian socialism, especially its critique of capitalism and in discussing what a communist society would look like: see Levitas 2011; Manuel and Manuel 1979: ch 29; and Paden 2002). In this section I am focusing on two criticisms about change, especially in relation to the material reality of mainstream current society. These say utopianism is a hindrance to change (see Geoghegan 2008; Leopold 2007; Levitas 2011; Paden 2002). Such criticisms undermine utopianism and utopian projects by implying they are reactionary and regressive, so it is important to assess them. In the next section I will discuss issues of end-ism and totalitarianism in utopias that could undermine change.

### *1) Utopias avoid changing mainstream society.*

Utopias can be seen as a block on social change. Rather than facilitating change in mainstream society they encourage stepping aside from it to alternative current day utopias. This avoids and undermines transforming society. Or they may be dreams for the future that distract from making change in the present. (See Allen 2011: ch. 2; Geoghegan 2008: ch. 2; Leopold 2005; Paden 2002; Pleyers 2010).

A version of this is an argument about a compensatory function of utopianism (see Levitas 2011). Future utopias are compensation for the present. When we think about a rosier future it helps us to cope with the unhappiness of present society. We imagine something better, or live in our imagination in a better world. This helps us feel happier with the present and avoids and preserves the present rather than encouraging change away from it.

From this critical point of view, engagement with current conflicts of capitalism is a better route than experiments that step aside from them. The former involves changing society rather than avoiding current society.

*2) In utopianism future change is not embedded in economic and social change; it lacks materialism.*

It can be argued that utopias separate the development of future societies from economic and social change by making plans for the future in an idealistic way, not based in contemporary conflicts and development. They are too much of a dream not based in real processes. Utopias lack a political economy or analysis of current power. They are not embedded in an analysis of current change and what possibilities for a future society that may facilitate or allow. From this point of view, imagination alone is ineffective for social transformation or even counterproductive and not the way to change things. Historical materialism, on the other hand, thinks about the future on the basis of existing conflicts and tendencies and where they may be going and about material bases for change. (See Avineri 1973; Dawson 2016: chs 2 and 9; Geoghegan 2008; Hudis 2012; Leopold 2016; Paden 2002).

Marcuse has taken various positions on utopia (see Levitas 2011: 173). In 'The End of Utopia' (Marcuse 1970) he argues that left-wing utopianism is inappropriate. Utopianism is aiming for something that seems unrealisable. But Marcuse argues that change to a socialist future is very possible under capitalism because the subjective intellectual and objective technological conditions for change to socialism exist. Technological development makes the abolition of poverty, misery and labour possible in a radically different society. Intellectually it is known that this can be done and there are ideas for how to organise society differently for the peace, autonomy and material subsistence of all. What holds us back are class and power relations of production in which the powerful prevent change made possible by the technological and material forces of production. Marcuse's position leads to the argument I am assessing here, that change to a more socialist society should engage with current material conflicts, possibilities and power more than stepping aside from them or dreaming of a utopian future, which is not necessary and is a distraction.

There are answers to these criticisms. These are not about defending stepping aside and idealistic dreams, but are on the basis that utopianism can be material and conflictual. They defend utopianism not against but from within a materialist and conflict framework.

*1) Current utopias do not step aside; they are part of the conflicts and materialism of current society.*

Current utopian experiments do not step aside from society that cleanly. One experience they have is that it is difficult to disengage from wider society. A co-op, intentional community or free university, for instance, pursue their own approach but also engage in a meaningful and ongoing way with surrounding society, for example in the form of the customers of the co-op, the students of the free university and institutions and processes, state or capitalist, they interact with as part of their projects. Such initiatives engage with suppliers, retailers, the capitalist and market economy, funders, law, government, and local communities. Their members and users are part of wider society, in work, family, education, welfare and other areas, and participate in it, as do the utopias they participate in.

The alternative ideologies and forms of organisation of current utopias create contradictions in and with existing society. They may for instance, have non-market or non-capitalist principles in contradiction with the principles of the wider economy, society and state. They are part of the contradictions and relations of current society, within and against it, economically, socially and culturally, and do not simply avoid the conflicts of society. Forging a utopian experiment in the here and now is as much part of the material conflicts and development of current society and the change that leads to, as it is aside from these. It may contribute to conflicts and negations in society as much as avoid them. (Moylan 1986 discusses utopias in literature as critical, oppositional and a negation of the present. See also Levitas 2011 and Sargisson 2012).

*2) Current utopias are materialist because they pursue change based on material experience of alternatives rather than on theory or ideology about the future.*

Existing small-scale experimental utopias ground change in current societies by their own action. They make future-oriented utopianism into something founded on the current material practice of alternatives as much as on theoretical or ideological beliefs about alternatives in the future. In this sense they are materialist in ways that some revolutionary paths are less so. Revolutionary perspectives base transformation in material changes to capitalism, but the alternative some propose can rely more on a theoretical and ideological case than material experience of it. Current utopias attempt to create material alternatives within current society as a basis for change to a future society. They are about showing (more actual) as much as telling (more theoretical). While future-oriented utopianism can be accused of speculative theory from a perspective that grounds change in material reality, current utopias ground the future in current experiment and demonstration, rather than argument (see also Goodwin and Taylor 2009; for a recent advocacy of experimentalist socialism see Honneth 2017). Against them a perspective that wants to build communism later and not also now can be seen to be more in the vein of speculative theory about the alternative.

Utopianism is materialist in other ways. For Bauman (1976), utopian ideas, like others, develop from material experience and represent material interests, often dissenting ones, and they are based in the inventive elements of humanity. Similarly Moylan (1986) says that utopias are rooted in class needs and wants and the historical context. Mannheim (1979) saw ideology as of the dominant, looking back, and maintaining society while utopia is dreams of the future by the subordinate, part



of transformation away from the present. Levitas (1979) and Goodwin and Taylor (2009) argue that utopias change with social forms of society, and so have a basis in material reality. Jameson (2007) says that utopias develop out of material experience and are very bound to it, so that it is difficult for them to escape from this to imagine idealistic alternatives. In these senses utopias are not ideas created out of the air but have a material basis. Utopianism cannot be dismissed because future change will come out of material conditions rather than from speculative plans because utopia, as materialists point out about ideas in general, develops out of material conditions. The dichotomy between materialism and utopianism is false.

*3) Utopias are not just oppositional and conflictual but positive and creative, which can be good for the morale of people involved in change and so good for change.*

Utopias are not just oppositional and conflictual within capitalism but have a creative and positive dimension. Ongoing participation in the former type of politics can be disheartening, demoralising and even emotionally damaging. The latter can feel more progressive, in making and producing something. For some, creative change is easier and more uplifting to engage in than conflictual and oppositional change. Conflictual and oppositional politics is very important. But by also positively constructing, utopian alternatives now contribute to social change as much as avoid it.

Both historical materialist and utopian perspectives can be revolutionary and about change. Issues are: 1) whether to build utopian communities in the here and now as a basis for change or to build alternative societies after capitalism; and 2) whether the material bases for change are in fighting conflicts in and with capitalism or in experiments in utopia now.

In relation to (1) I have mentioned materialist aspects of utopianism now, arguing that alternative forms that exist provide a material basis for alternative forms in the future. Introducing alternatives now can be part of change to alternatives in the future and does not need to be left until then. In fact, it is better to experiment with new social forms in current society than risk leaving them untested until after societal change.

As far as (2) goes I have said that current utopias provide contradictions with wider society. So they are not an alternative to conflicts now, but part of them. In terms of conflicts in mainstream capitalism beyond alternative forms, those trying utopias now can take both routes, both alternative societies now and participation in other conflicts in capitalism itself, for instance in the capitalist workplace, or opposition to government policies. Many who pursue utopian experiments as a basis for future change are also often involved in material conflicts within current capitalism and in relation to the state (see Pleyers 2010 on the alter-globalization movement). The approaches are not mutually exclusive and do not have to substitute for one another. Current utopianism does not have to be an alternative to oppositional politics within capitalism; it can be part of and an accompaniment to it. The dichotomy between within-capitalism politics and utopian politics is a false one.

### Co-option into capitalism

One possibility is that pursuing alternative societies within capitalism will lead to them being dominated and co-opted by capitalism. In tension with the argument that

utopias step aside from society, this view suggests they cannot step aside. For example, Greenberg (1981, 1983) argues that co-ops in market capitalist contexts can adopt possessive individualism rather than co-operative and egalitarian attitudes. Alternatives in current society will have to engage with and compromise with wider structures, which could reproduce those structures, absorb their ideologies and undermine alternatives and their role in creating a different society in the future. Therefore alternatives to capitalism should be pursued after capitalism. However, non-utopian oppositional politics aimed at a future alternative can also be co-opted or compromised when it engages in struggles against the state and with capitalism within a society where the economy, state, culture and discourse are dominated by capitalism and power. Such politics has to relate to institutions like government and non-governmental organisations such as trade unions as well as capitalism and mainstream discourses and power.

There is a danger of co-option and domination by capitalism, as there is with all politics in capitalism. But, as I have argued, current utopias create contradictions with capitalism and conflict with it. Furthermore alternatives are not monolithic or passive. There are variations amongst them. Some are more alternative and less likely to be co-opted than others. For example, co-ops set up to save jobs are more about economic survival than co-operative and democratic ideals and may be more likely to succumb to co-option into capitalism. Alternative co-ops set up with co-operative and democratic ideals as their main aim are more likely to resist co-option (see Cornforth 1983). Co-ops can and do react against incorporation, organisationally and ideologically, finding ways to counter co-option into capitalist and hierarchical forms and ideas (Bate and Carter 1986, Cornforth 1995, and Masquelier 2017b discuss how this can happen in co-ops. Kanter 1972 discusses how intentional communities maintain their autonomy and values).

### Materialist and utopian perspectives and change

Table 1 outlines views on social change from the point of view of materialist and utopian perspectives I have outlined. 1) Future utopia perspectives are oriented to an ideal society in the future. 2) Current utopia perspectives are oriented to utopian experiments in current society, for their own sake and also as the basis for wider social change in the future. 3) Materialist revolutionary perspectives envisage a different society in the future but are critical of perspectives that focus on future ideals or small-scale utopias now aside from society rather than present-day conflicts against current society and politics in trying to get to a future society. 4) Materialist utopian views may see these different approaches as not mutually exclusive and as compatible.

Table 1: Utopianism, Materialism and Change

	Perspective on materialism	Perspective on utopianism
Future utopia perspectives	Important not just to focus on material conflicts with only basic principles for the alternative; should have a plan for what a future society will look	Future utopias can be a basis for criticism of the present, and an ideal, both of which can be catalysts for change; also a plan for what we are aiming for.

	like.	
Current utopia perspectives	Material experiments in utopian alternatives now, as well as theories and ideologies about alternatives, can be the basis for wider social change in the future.	Utopian alternatives now are the basis for future alternatives; future utopian alternatives as well as present ones are an aim.
Materialist revolutionary perspectives	Engaging in material conflicts in capitalism to overthrow it is the basis for change, not developing separate alternatives aside from or inside capitalism.	Current utopian experiments step aside from and avoid conflicts within capitalism; future utopias are not based enough in current conflicts within capitalism.
Materialist utopian perspectives	There can be experiments in utopias now that are a material basis for alternative societies now and in the future; we can engage at the same time in material conflicts with and within capitalism.	Positive utopias now can be pursued; as part of and alongside conflicts within capitalism, these are the basis for wider social change in the future.

Levitas (2011) discusses Marxist perspectives on utopia and change and charts how some, such as Marx and Engels, argue utopia prevents change (perspective 3 above) while other Marxists, such as Bloch, E.P. Thompson, William Morris and sometimes Marcuse, that it facilitates change (more in tune with perspective 4). (In addition see Goodwin and Taylor 2009, who also include Rudolf Bahro as a Marxist utopian). This may reflect that Marx and Engels' criticisms are of aspects of utopianism that are contingent not necessary (see Leopold 2016), so it is possible for Marxists to also be positive about utopianism. While Marx and Engels criticise utopian socialists on materialist and conflict grounds they are also, as I have mentioned, supportive, and Marxist defenders of utopianism appeal to statements of Marx and Engels to claim a Marxist heritage for their views. My own reply to materialist and conflict criticism is a materialist and conflict one. I am avoiding saying that the materialist and conflict critique of utopianism is a Marxist one because of this ambiguity on utopianism amongst Marxist perspectives.

Marxists can stay Marxist in pursuing utopian change. But they need to incorporate liberal and pluralist concerns to keep utopia and change. This leads to the next section.

### **Totalitarianism, utopianism and change**

My arguments so far have been that utopias can be a material and conflictual basis for change within current society, rather than a retreat from this. I wish to turn now to another possibility for utopianism inhibiting change. Utopian societies are end-ist and totalitarian and so could stop change once utopia has been achieved (see Dahrendorf 1958). I wish to argue this need not be the case. It is possible to think of self-determination and process as utopian ideals, and these involve change. It is possible

to envisage utopia as liberal and pluralist, which allows dissent, diversity and criticism that lead to change. Experimental pluralistic utopia can also be an antidote to the rationalist constructivist utopianism that critics of utopia as totalitarian focus on. I will discuss liberal and pluralist criticisms and then come to the implications for change.

A key concern about utopias is that they are dangerous and potentially totalitarian. From this point of view, they are ideas of a good society that require conformity to the ideal. The ideal may be a particular one, only of some, yet requires general adherence. (See Butler 1983, Gray 2008 and Popper 2011 for anti-constructivist, liberty and conservative arguments and Sargisson 2012; although critics of utopianism may propose their own utopias, for instance Hayek 1980). Common conformity in a utopia can be justified on the basis that people have a potential human nature that would be realised or expressed in such a society. Everyone would fit with the utopia because it coincided with their human nature. Or in an ideal society people will choose conformity to a total idea for all. The nature of such a society will lead to a change in consciousness or human essence to allow this. For instance, if production or living are controlled and run collectively we would commonly develop a collective consciousness.

This could be an unrealistic, implausible or too demanding idea of human nature or humans. In any society there may be greater pluralism than allowed by such a total vision. Capitalism itself is hybrid and accommodates non-capitalist structures and values despite the prevalence of the capitalist and market economy and culture. If this is the case then to achieve wide collective commitment to the utopia people would have to be persuaded to its values. If people do not necessarily fit with a society because of their nature or its virtues then they will have to be convinced. If voluntary commitment or ideological persuasion do not work then a utopia may have to involve force or repression on people to adhere to it. Furthermore, the passion for utopias by their supporters can be dangerous, and involve an energy for rightness that is a threat to non-conformity, dissidence and individuals who do not wish to fit into the model. In short, it could be said that there are totalitarian dangers in utopian ideas of ideal societies. Furthermore, if a total ideal is applied voluntarily or by imposition it will lead to an end to change.

Liberalism is against totalistic ideas of a good society in favour of individuals choosing their own ends, within a framework of a state and law setting boundaries and maintaining order. Liberalism can be counterposed to utopianism because it permits individuals to decide their goals, not be required to conform to those of society. Having such choice is undermined by economic and power inequalities that liberalism allows to grow. But egalitarian or left-wing liberals will argue this can be countered by redistribution of wealth, income and power to underpin the realisation of freedom that liberals value, redistribution being balanced with liberal institutions and principles.

Concern about the potential totalitarianism of utopias is reinforced by the experience of fascism and communism in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. They were ideologies with total visions of society; in some cases of the internationalisation of their form of society, leaving not even global alternatives as a possibility. As has been mentioned, the development of more sceptical attitudes and postmodern pluralism in society, it is argued, have also exposed problems in utopianism and sociologically eroded the basis for total utopias (Bauman, 2003).

An outcome or implication of these arguments is that totalistic utopianism is no more. This is in social and political ideologies and fiction or art, descriptively and normatively. Disillusioned with the idea and practices of utopianism people no longer believe in utopias, or believe in them only as small-scale micro-utopias. These are not total and exist alongside other forms of society, or are about experimenting with utopia first and, if it works, spreading it by example. This is rather than expecting everyone to conform, or at least is about trying to see or show first at a smaller level that the utopia works and is attractive as a basis for people adhering to it.

### Pluralism and change in utopia

One response to concerns about utopias as totalitarian is to argue that there should not be such a dichotomy between liberalism and utopia. This allows acceptance of alternatives and pluralism. A utopia can be of an ideal society, but one that is tolerant of diversity. Belief in a utopia does not necessitate that it has to be imposed. So we may decide that a society based on collective ownership of the economy and of work is our ideal. But we could also feel that such a society will not be for everyone and will never attract complete conformity and, therefore, that we accept pluralism and diversity, including a minority role for private enterprise. To not do so would require authoritarian imposition on those who wish to do something different. The utopia could be attractive enough to ensure that divergence from the dominant ideal is not widespread. Or there can be regulation to allow diversity but also protect a strong role for collective ownership. This does not mean utopia is a variety of utopias, but a utopia to which alternatives are permitted (see Horowitz 1989).

We should not polarise liberalism and utopia. One possibility is that liberalism (eg see Mannheim 1979; Goodwin and Taylor 2009) is a utopia. However I wish to focus on the possibility of it being a part of utopia. All societies are hybrids, and utopias can aspire to ideal arrangements combined with liberal tolerance of alternatives. Balances like this are difficult to maintain, and if the dominant drive is to an ideal rather than individuals pursuing all ends, it is right to highlight that the former is a threat to the latter. But it is also worth considering that people in society can try to make sure the two co-exist (see Honneth 2017 for a recent argument that socialism should incorporate liberalism).

These points relate to the possibility that utopianism rules out change because in a utopia the ideal society has been realised. There is no alternative left to strive for. This potentiality is raised by Marx's concept of communism and ideas like Fukuyama's (1989) liberal end of history. However, current or future utopianism can allow liberalism and pluralism: in current utopianism by the utopia being within existing society and alongside other forms; in the future by allowing pluralism and alternatives. In these versions achieving a utopia does not end change. With pluralism, different forms and criticism continue, and so allow the possibility of change. If utopias now or in the future are not total but are combined with alternatives this provides other and critical views that can encourage change.

Utopian experimentation now and utopianism with pluralism in the future provide answers to criticism from writers like Hayek and Popper that utopianism places too much faith in humans' rational capacities to design and construct an ideal society. Such critics prefer trial and error, practical experiment, evolution and conservatism.

But utopian experimenting allows for material testing of utopia, for diversity in current and future utopias, and for alternatives should utopias fail. This gives utopia an empirical and testable and not just theoretical and speculative dimension. It allows modification or rejection and so change. This is a materialist approach that sees theory being proved or otherwise in practice or action.

Can a utopia in principle really involve change? If a utopian society has been achieved surely no change is needed. If change to something better is possible that must mean we have not reached utopia. I think a utopian society is compatible with change. A utopian society will not be perfectly realised because of factors such as political and cultural blocks, complexity and interpretation. So it will always be the best that can be achieved in the circumstances, short of utopia and so open to change and development. What is utopian now or at the time it is achieved may not continue to be ideal because of developments, intended or unforeseen, such as in technology or human nature, or unanticipated problems in the utopian society, and so will need change (see Leopold 2016). If utopia develops from material experiments these will lead to adjustments or changes to the utopia. In addition, utopian ideas are products of material circumstances. A utopian society will create new material circumstances that facilitate fresh utopian ideas, novel objectives and change. A materialist response can be not just to materialist critics but also to liberal critics of utopianism as totalitarian.

Ideals for a society can include criticism and pluralism and these lead to change. Criticism and pluralism are what you may want to have in a utopian society. They are ideals to aim for in current and future utopias, and they stimulate change which itself can be a utopian ideal. It is possible to have criticism, pluralism and change in utopia. Utopia is a process even when it is achieved.

Sargisson (2012) sees utopia as engagement with and critique of the present and imagination of something better, but not a blueprint, perfect, total, realisable or static. Levitas (2013) envisages utopia as an imagined totality but also as heuristic, provisional and reflective, and open to criticism and debate. For her, utopia, being about critical assessment of the present, holistic thinking about a better future and trying to get there, is a method (of what she calls the 'imaginary reconstitution of society') rather than a goal or description. (See also Goodwin and Taylor 2009: 111, 232-3 and 241-3).

Marx's idea of communism may or may not have been utopian depending on your perspective. But it was envisaged as an end point yet one in which change was still possible. This is because communism by definition is about collective self-determination of society so is open to society being changed. And for Marx communism allowed human self-development so in theory allows people to change in communism. A final society can be a dynamic rather than static one (see Geoghegan, 2008, Paden, 2002).

Is utopia that is current as well as in the future, is empirical and experimental, pluralist and liberal, and accepting of alternatives, no longer utopia because it does not fit benchmarks such as being in the future and total? Utopianism that focuses on critique, process or experiment and disowns an alternative goal can cease to have what defines utopia and makes it distinct from other forms of politics and political ideology. I think what I have discussed can meet criteria for a good society that is elsewhere (in the future, or in a space in current society with a different logic), is an

alternative, with a focus on design and structure, and not just on ideas and values as in non-utopian aspects of political ideologies. I am arguing for utopia that allows space for pluralism and change but with a design for an alternative to the present rather than no conception of an alternative.

Goodwin and Taylor (2009) respond to liberal criticisms of utopia in part by questioning liberalism and justifying non-liberal utopianism. But rather than rejecting the liberal and pluralist framework of criticisms of utopia, I have argued that within that framework utopianism can be liberal and pluralist and is not necessarily in contradiction with such approaches. The conflation of utopia with illiberalism and the dichotomy between utopia and liberalism and pluralism are false and not necessary. Liberal and pluralist critics can be answered from within their framework and not necessarily by rejecting it.

## **Conclusions**

Criticisms of utopianism involve false conflations and dichotomies. Utopia is conflated with idealism, speculation, separation from society, the future, substitution for other forms of politics, rationalism, totality, end-ism, and totalitarianism. What is potential is made into necessity. Arguments against utopianism involve false dichotomies between utopia and materialism, conflict, liberalism, pluralism, oppositional and institutional politics, and trial and error. These conflations and dichotomies can be overcome whilst utopia maintains its distinctiveness.

I have discussed future and current utopianisms. I have discussed two possible perspectives from which such utopias can be seen to undermine social change. One sees utopianism as idealist and stepping aside from material conflicts in society rather than engaging in them to build change. The other sees utopias being end-ist and totalitarian and stopping change. They envisage us having reached perfection and do not allow diversity from the utopian ideal. In the case of the former argument I have not argued against the material, conflictual approach by defending ideal dreams or stepping aside as a basis for change, but have argued for utopianism's potentiality for change on a materialist conflictual basis. On the latter I have said that utopianism can be about process and pluralism. It does not have to be end-ist and totalitarian and so ending of change on those bases.

In terms of criticism from a materialist and conflict perspective, utopianism does not need to reject this approach, but can have a materialist and conflict approach. I have given a materialist and conflict reply to a materialist and conflict criticism. On liberal and pluralist concerns about change in utopia, utopianism does not need to reject these but can encompass them. I have argued for liberalism and pluralism in utopia in response to liberal and pluralist concerns. Criticism from materialist/conflict and liberal/pluralist perspectives have not been responded to by rejection of their perspectives but answered on their terms.

Neoliberalism and the right are prevalent internationally while the left experiences mixed fortunes. Radical change to alternative societies has a very flawed record. In this context, left-utopianism, alongside party politics and social movements, provides an important route for critical and positive left politics. This is based on alternatives within society and visions of a better society. Left-utopianism needs to be critically defended not dismissed. It also needs to be pluralist and open to change and it gives

us means for it being so. Utopianism is part of changing society, materially, now and in the future.

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